

The role of digital in UK cultural institutions for Culture 24.

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Speaker Notes:

My job is a little hard to describe, I work for a team called the Creative Lab and we work with groups across Google and external partners finding ways to use our platforms for creative projects that explore the full range of possibilities in groundbreaking ways.

It's a special privilege for me to be invited to share my views on the role of digital in our cultural sector - because museums and institutions, especially in the arts have always been a huge part of my life and something that I always wanted to be a part of so I feel rather lucky that my journey has somehow led to this union.

:: the story of my life

When I was little. Around the age of ten, I decided, or someone decided, that I wanted to be an artist. It became a consuming passion and I went to university to study Fine Art, probably not the right university to study fine art but an interesting and enriching place to spend three years. And then, when I realised that I was not going to become "an artist", I decided that I wanted to make books, specifically book art, and to be a book artist. And then when I realized I was going to starve as a book artist, I became a designer, and from there went on to work at the Royal Academy of Arts magazine, which I loved. I got to set up the magazine's first website, and other innovations. I was always looking to explore the newest technology to our end. It is rewarding to be back in a role that aligns with the culture sector once again, working closely with RA again, with the RCA, with the ICA, I have great friends at Tate, at Royal Opera House, the English National Ballet, the BBC, the LSO, the Science Museum, and many more— it is a long, varied list.

:: British Culture

The British culture sector is probably one of the things that we have the most to be proud about in this country. Through our heritage and our collections we have an unending bounty of riches. However precarious the future, the extensive variety and quality of our museums, houses, and trusts is something we can take great pride in, even if, occasionally, we don't seem to demonstrate that.

But I didn't actually come here to compliment you, or flatter or patronize.

Instead let's talk about what I am sure most of you will recognize as a perfectly typical rather random career trajectory. As we move through our lives we may make plans for our own lives, concoct strategy, take actions, take courses, self-improve, move houses, quit jobs

etc. But normally these things do not appear as part of a grand plan, they are unexpected or simply unavoidable. When something isn't quite right or goes wrong we adapt and we move forward towards an ultimate goal.

In my case the goal was to be working with the culture sector. That was what I always wanted to do - but another, unexpected and significant thing occurred that altered my particular journey. The entire world changed. Everything we thought we understood shifted beneath our feet, like a magician pulling a tablecloth. It stayed the same, but somehow different. The internet arrived.

:: take #2

Here's another version of exactly the same journey.

From an early age I have been interested in technology. At the age of 5 my father brought home a ZX81, an early home computer, and by the age of 8 I knew how to code in BASIC. I wasn't very good (believe me, I really wasn't) but I knew how. At school my technology education was neglectful verging on non-existent, and probably due to that I thrived in the arts. In 1994 I found myself at Oxford, it was 4 years after Tim Berners-Lee invented the web and I took my first html class, and got my first email address.

Unfortunately I found it quite frustrating, and remember saying loudly that I would much rather have some ink, a photocopier and some sellotape. It took me another 7 years before I learnt to code properly in html, and even then it was just as a hobby.

In 1999 a friend and I set up our first dotcom during the first boom. He was the brains, I was, just sort of there. It was a brilliant idea, a sort of digital social network for elite universities allowing them to share their gossip and pictures and... well, let's just say it was a bit ahead of its time...

After the crash of 2001, which I was also in, I spent the summer, and my redundancy cheque, on learning to code. I made a website. I put my books on it. They did not sell.

:: I now work for Google.

I never meant to work for Google. It was an accident. It was, at the very kindest interpretation, an adaptive strategy. But both these stories are true and they are sincere.

The point is that I believe it is perfectly possible to be true to your roots and care very passionately in everything that you do, and yet also to build and experiment with digital tools, to wrap digital ideas around your organisation that will augment their vision.

Today is about looking at whether it is possible for you to write the second version of your story – the digitally enabled version, the story that doesn't make us feel like luddites, that allow us to engage and to move, at whatever pace we choose, towards a dignified but

digitally immersive culture sector.

I will say a few words about what I do in my day job – but I am not here to talk about Google, I'm not in policy, I'm not in partnerships and I'm not even an engineer.

At Google we do try to understand the challenges faced by culture orgs, and the individual needs of every institution. We're trying to do our bit to help everyone move forward at their own pace and know what tools are available to them. But I probably don't really have the specific answers you are looking for. There are plenty of people here with actual skills. Instead I have a few questions, a few starting off points and a few challenges.

In many ways my job is to think like users, to think like you might, like your organisations should, and to find interesting and creative ways to use Google's platforms and tools, from search to streetview, youtube to translate, adwords to android. My job is to show these tools to the world in interesting ways.

:: emergent strategy

I look at some of the people and the talks that Jane and team have lined up today and it is daunting. I am - to nearly everyone here - a failed artist, a failed internet entrepreneur, a culture sector reject; I have adequately tried and failed, as a marketer, as a designer, a project manager, I'm not a strategist, a copywriter, a photographer, nor a coder... I have made a career out of being not quite good enough at everything.

But I do speak all those languages, and after talking to Jane it became increasingly clear that failure as a learning mechanism was going to be a very important theme of today, its intrinsic value, what I called failing quietly, or what we might more nicely call iteration, or practise, or, most triumphantly, emergent strategy.

Today will be a day for emphasizing that digital culture is not just a bolt-on tactic. It's not a nice-to have, it's not IT, it isn't an app and it's more than "a few lines of code". What we will be discussing isn't a digital strategy for your organisation, it is the actual strategy, it is the first place that your visitors visit, it's the entrance hall, the coat check, the cafe and the reception desk, it's the number one touch point for your organization.

Mobile phones, ipads, laptop are completely ubiquitous in contemporary daily life, they are not going to become less so and they have transformed our lives. Except in a few sectors of society. One of which is culture. Today is about looking at that and understanding it better, and in numbers that prove it, to inform the decision makers, and empower the action takers.

:: what should you look to take from today?

It is all well and good to say that I am passionate about culture, our institutions and the possibilities for the internet to inspire and connect people with culture globally. It doesn't really change anything. Each organisation has politics, plans, budget crises and tricky audiences. Hopefully what will help will be the ammunition you can take from an event like this. I think you need bullets and grenades in the form of metrics and data, targets and reports! And to know that you, and the people around you, will be the generation that brings the cultural sector in this country out of the twentieth century. Unfortunately the cultural sector simply has to find ways to engage and deliver on its promises using digital tools. This is either going to be planned, or it will be unexpected and sudden. There is a strong need to move digital up the agenda, from being 'the website', past Marketing, to sit alongside Programming, being a key driver for the organization.

:: What does this ammo look like?

Well it's that word again, Metrics. If you can prove it with numbers you can do it. If you can't prove it, but you passionately believe it then you do it quietly until you can prove it. Both these things are true at Google. It is important to understand the vision of your own organization and know how digital tools can help deliver this, and create user-oriented experiences.

:: digital is everywhere

I have been speaking recently about the ubiquity of digital technology in our lives and how it allows us to see past the technology to find art in these new forms. For example what is a normal day for you? perhaps you woke up to the Today programme, on a digital radio, or to a digital alarm, you may have gone to work, where, like me, you spend your days on email, on mobile phones, or on the internet, perhaps gossiping, productively, on the social network of your choice, maybe you listened to some mp3's or Spotify, planned your next holiday, tagged some friends on Facebook, read the Guardian on your ipad, went home, watched the Killing on the iplayer, played a few rounds of angry birds on your chromebook, tweeted about newsnight and went to bed. Or maybe not, I don't know...

Maybe you picked vegetables from your organic allotment, did some yoga, spun a pot, went for a cycle ride, baked some banana bread and then spent the evening knitting before taking an old-fashioned paperback to bed - in which case good for you – that sounds like the most blissful day. But I think most people recognise that society has reached a point where digital technology, and the internet have become so ever-present, so fundamental to our lives that we simply expect that institutions and organisations will deliver the highest

quality of experience and level of access... and if our generation doesn't quite think that this is their birthright well there is a generation below who think the internet has always existed and they are now in their late teens. Behind that generation are some very young people who consider magazines to be broken, because the touch-screen doesn't work. Unfortunately we will not be able to simply tell them that they are wrong. We need to plan around our audience, not our preferences.

A quick survey - do you feel that your organization's digital presence is an invisible membrane that allows their audience to intuitively interact with the institutions offering in a helpful and interesting way?

In other words is your digital experience so good that people don't even see it, or do they just not see it? Is it helpful or invisible?

We, the culture sector, have been rather lucky. As curators, and preservationists, educators and archivists we have not really been called upon to man the barricades during the revolutionary epoch. There is little cultural piracy. Few illicit Russian websites offering free downloads of hi-res paintings. This meant that we were able to sit back and can now follow many others onto those digital battlefields, to inspect, and learn from them, and, hopefully without any further bloodshed, utilise this democratizing platform to the benefit of this next generation.

:: make a model

There are two problems as I understand. The first is to let people inside the organization know that it is time to step up. The second is how to do this on a budget.

Can I suggest making a model?

The Art project is a project of ours that began back in 2008 in Spain, with a Google earth layer that allowed you to fly into a sketchup model of the Prado with pictures of the building on the inside. It was set up and organized by one girl. She was called Clara.

The Art Project we launched in January was meant to be a similar rough sketch but with more galleries. In the end 17 galleries were involved and the whole thing became bigger than we had imagined because people could see the power of that first model. And now we are in the same place again, only this time we have been inundated with requests. We will continue this model until we succeed or fail. That is how these things happen. Not in a major way but in a progression of models that inspire and excite.

:: know what you want to achieve.

1. What is the purpose of your organisation?

2. What is the role of your website?

So sometimes we don't know what is going to happen. But we normally know what we want to happen. Especially if you are in business. When we talk about success metrics, about analytics and user numbers and participation rates - these numbers are not terribly relevant if you don't know what you wanted to happen in the first place.

What is your organisation's mission? That should inspire and inform decisions, it should be easy to articulate, it should remind you why you come to work every day.

For example Google is all about organizing the worlds information. So it is easy for me to talk about the value of data and how important it is to capture and manage that data

Many of you probably know this. Data is your new front of house. You have so much data and your visitors love it, even if they didn't expect it. Oversharing used to be the realm of education, now it is marketing.

It is where you exchange information with your audience and make them part of your organization.

This needs to happen both on your website and off. In every aspect of your organization you need to think about how you can make the experience relevant and personal to the people that you are speaking to.

:: Package the package.

Everything that you do offline should create content online. That online content should for part of a narrative that allows people to experience an event at a number of different levels. We call this packaging the package.

For example with projects of ours like the YouTube Symphony Orchestra or YouTube Space Lab we understand that the actual number of active participants will be very small, but that by a factor of ten there will be an active audience online, and by another factor of ten a passive audience outside that. So the process of the event becomes a form of content: masterclasses, behind the scenes videos, visualisations of information, feedback loops, comments and debate, user-generated content, a sense of community. All of these are built on the original material and would probably happen anyway – we just try and turn them into content so that many more people can feel a part of a project online.

:: put the user first.

Quite often we forget who we are trying to talk to, or try to make things that are simply not useful nor delightful, projects which are more for us than for our users.

This starts with simple things like writing long, convoluted copy when it isn't called for – even when we know our visitors won't read it, or creating challenging yet unintelligible

graphics, or whizz-bang dynamic flashery, or complicated navigation systems.

As a user can I say that I don't really care about the structure of your site. I simply want the content, I want to get to it incredibly easily without having to think about it, and in the format that I need it, I want the content the length that I want it (which for me, is short), and I want it presented in a way that helps me, not hinders me. If you think about how you use the internet you will probably see that you feel the same way, yet we often forget this when we create material for others.

Luckily the internet allows us to experiment with different kinds of content and delivery, and we can track it and then we get numbers.

Finding out what that content might be, - well that's your job – you know your audience and how to deliver that. You already have amazing, beautiful, fascinating objects, images and stories. Finding the way to get that content to audiences in the simplest, most helpful or most interesting way is a great job description.

There is a charming example of this by Tate Video within the Art Project. An example of creating videos that cater for different audiences in the same space. Tate created two videos for the The Cholmondley ladies and Ghost of a flea - one with a curator in a traditional style; one in a funky style that appeals to a different kind of visitor. Both do the job very well. We find that video makes far more engaging content than copy.

:: know what works

It is interesting that cultural groups already do this incredibly well at an exhibition level with 'real' visitors. As a sector it is excellent at knowing its audience, catering to them, listening to them, responding to them, providing education, outreach, entertainment and a sense of community. And it does all of this on the faintest breath of a budget.

So the knowledge and the skill is already there and probably hard-wired into the culture of the institute, the challenge is creating digital channels for the decades of experience at managing and sharing culture with the general public.

It is also curious to ask some questions about user numbers. For example we have shown, and try to remind our favourite funding bodies, that metrics such as length of visit, or number of page views will drop if you improve the site and make it a more optimal experience. (Less time randomly clicking pages!) So instead of thinking as large numbers as a default success metric should we be looking to define audience participation more precisely? Quality of engagement, depth of reading and other more intelligent measurements are more valuable to you. It is also worth asking how many people internally are focused on assessing and developing this.

It seems normal that an organisation won't give equivalent time or budget to digital visitors

as they would using offline media, or talks or tours. In fact the ratio is like to be quite significant.

So the question becomes... is the online experience weaker, less real, less valuable because of the medium, or because of the relative amount of time and money per visitor that goes into it?

:: know what you do

It is not uncommon for one's own company to struggle with strategy, or to communicate it in a sensible way. I have found myself wondering what we are doing, or why we are doing something.

You might understand the goal, but not how you expect to achieve it. If you don't understand the general direction it's very hard to make tactical decisions like, left or right, big or small, social or broadcast, visionary or academic, dry or funny, young or old, all or nothing.

Actually each of those are real choices that you should probably be able to make about your organisation.

You need to know:

(I like them on a slider in my mind)

Local < - > Global

Dialogue < - > Monologue

Popularity < - > Engagement

Light touch < - > Deep Resource

You < - > Your Stuff

Quality < - > Quantity

If each of these was on a scale from 1 to 10 where would your digital practice fit. Are you trying to do both in some cases? That's quite hard.

The next big question is what does success look like? There is no cookie cutter for this.

Look at the sliders. You are different. Everyone is different.

But as long as you know the bigger goal then these decisions will feel right and make the digital experience seem much more personal and relevant to the audience.

:: commit to the long-game.

Another issue with digital is that it does not end, for organisations that deal with fixed-term projects, like exhibitions this can be challenging.

It's not finite, and neither are communities. Your digital presence should never be done. It will always be growing and you have to commit to that, it may become clearer, and more identifiable maybe, but always learning and growing. In my opinion it is preferable to

constantly iterate than to seek a state of stagnant perfection. Your digital experience should be developed and nurtured, make it something that you are proud of and that others look up to. Try not to be satisfied with it.

:: How to 'use' digital

We frequently get asked how to "hit people" with their site or their exhibition; how to reach out and tell people what you have; how to "use" Google as a tool.

These are good questions with real practical answers, unfortunately I don't know those answers. But I would normally start with the same question. Which people? All people? And another question, what's the largest print run for an ad your organisation has ever taken out? Or the largest direct mail? 100k? 1m? 12m?

Once you can identify your audience, once you know the demographic, the location, and their interests then you can build a plan to market to them online just as you might offline, and once again you might look at how many people are doing that and what skills they have. But if you don't know that you should ask 'what are we doing here?' because, what are you doing?

The long-term depends on being able to show the clear benefit of visitor-led, targeted digital tools to your decision makers. Not large numbers of visitors.

This probably means using social tools, paid online advertising, videos, and also directory listings, and posters, and mail drops that lean on your digital presence. For example at Google we expect to measure and show the value of each aspect of this.

Communities and word of mouth are even more powerful online - taking part and being an energetic voice within communities, or creating platforms and opportunities for your visitors to become your champions is the most powerful way to maintain a strong online presence, it's also the hardest part to measure.

I have come to appreciate conventional advertising tools, but personally I prefer projects that allow our very geeky, techy users to demonstrate the benefits of our product for us. It always feels a little less like you are selling people something. My favourite example of this is our Chrome Experiments for developers that allows them to showcase their talents and simultaneously show how fast our browser is. Everyone wins.

:: Build it and they will come

I'm not sure this is true any more.

The idea that simple excellence or a clever idea is sufficient is losing ground as the overall quality of the web rises - "build it and they will come" was fine when there was no-where else to go, but we are in a world of ubiquity now - you really need to know who "they" are,

and how to let “them” know that you built it and where to find it.

:: Filter yourself as fast as others will

I am a very judgmental person. The first line of your website, will probably tell me almost all I need to know about you, or what I think I need to know, about you. So go back and try and read it through the eyes of someone who doesn't care.

:: Value what you have and who you are

If you have niche content or niche appeal celebrate and champion that.

Dusty archives will soon be digital dusty archives; open up your information, make it come alive, share it and make it accessible. Be a voice for your community and let them help you. If you reach out you will be surprised. Building something that lasts probably means other people (fans, or keen amateurs) owning and developing it for you over time. Empower your enablers.

Also you will have experienced surges in interest in a subject that is particular to your institution. These will be visualised both through trends in search engines like Google and can be visualised by you through your data, these can become powerful and useful moments for your organization. Look for it, set up alerts on Google, use the trend tracking tools and try to catch it and surf those waves of interest when they come.

I'm not sure it's worth planning or trying to manufacture them but do have action plans – the world can move very fast online so it is worth preparing fire drills for such an occasion that will let you maximize the moment of interest. Show that you are a visionary using the unfathomable magic of trends and data.

You are trusted guides. You are the curators of culture. People will look to you (online) for information, guidance and additional content. This is powerful.

:: Don't put it on your homepage

A homepage is not a shopfront. People come in the back.

The web is increasingly personalized, an advanced website will show every individual slightly different content base either on previous visits, based on topical information or news, based on the referring site, or their location, or simply on what they search for. Think of Amazon, or the BBC, or FaceBook. There is no reason why you should not think about your users the same way.

:: The F word

Fail, quickly, fail often, fail cheaply, fail quietly, but learn to fail... and then learn from failing.

The only true failure is not to learn from things that didn't work so well.

Fun. In a forward looking institution you will be asked to be "innovative", or to foster innovation because you are the digital people. Innovation is experimentation and exploration. It needs space, and time, and freedom. And that often looks like play. & play is fun. So follow the people having fun. Even if it doesn't seem to be sensible. Numerous small experiments on your site or apps allow you to try things out and find out more about your visitors and what they want from you.

:: The C word

Copyrights:

This is such a difficult subject. We've had experience of museums that are keen to get artworks online but that artist agencies and other bodies need payment, even from the smallest institutions. It would be great to see museums get serious about re-negotiating their policies with these companies on how content can be used online.

Likewise UGC is not a bad thing, allowing people to comment, create, curate, and do what they think they want to with your content builds layers of richness and depth around the work. It may need moderation but try to find ways to make this happen. A small experiment perhaps. You do not need to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds to do something interesting.

Three things to take away ::

(and these are going to seem extremely ungeeky coming from someone at Google talking about digital culture, but there you go.)

Know what you do & know who it's for.

Start small, fail quietly, work together.

Believe that you can make the difference.

Thank you...